



Colette Hansen serves dinner to 80-year-old Daisy Clark. In exchange for a two-bedroom apartment, Colette and her husband, Randy, help Mrs. Clark maintain her home through the University's shared-housing program. At far left are the Hansens — Randy, Colette and daughter Jennifer — with Mrs. Clark.

Since May 1984, Mr. Hansen, his wife Colette and their two-year-old daughter, Jennifer, have lived in Mrs. Clark's home through the shared-housing program coordinated by the U of U Long-Term Care Gerontology Center, which matches students with elderly homeowners who can no longer live alone. In exchange for a two-bedroom basement apartment, the Hansens clean Mrs. Clark's home, work in her yard and fix her meals. Since he is a third-year medical student, Mr. Hansen also checks Mrs. Clark's blood pressure and supervises her medications, at her family's request.

"It kind of scared me at first, that we would be living with someone totally unfamiliar," admitted Mr. Hansen. But he found that, when caring for the elderly, "it's easier with a stranger." With no memories of Mrs. Clark as a young mother, "we come into the situation as it is and say, 'What can we do to help?' We're able to work with her and look at it positively, not negatively. It's sad if you see your parent deteriorate."

Mrs. Clark, whose husband died about eight years ago, suffers from TIA, transient ischemic attacks in which blood is temporarily blocked to certain parts of the brain. As a result, her mental functions occasionally slow down. She uses a walker and has some hearing and sight loss. For this British woman, who had read nearly all of William Shakespeare's plays as well as ground her own flour, these losses can be upsetting.

"At times, she's frustrated, because she can't do anything," explained Mr. Hansen. "We can help alleviate that. We can get her up and help her do things. That makes her happy. That's the nearest thing."

"The biggest issue is that she be as independent as possible but get the best care."

In return for that care, Mr. Hansen and his family feel they benefit. "There's a lot to learn

from her. She's got a lot to add to our family," he noted. "She has a good memory and lots of really interesting tales. She recites poems to Jennifer. That helps our daughter to understand older people. A lot of us don't have the opportunity to introduce children to older people, so children grow afraid of them."

Knowing Mrs. Clark has helped mold Mr. Hansen's career plans as well. He's participating in the University's gerontology certification program. For his practicum, he will work with a geriatrics specialist, training that will be valuable to him as a general practitioner in a rural community.


"Increasing awareness and knowledge — that's the important issue to me. Everyone needs to know about the special needs of the elderly," noted Mr. Hansen. "Gerontology isn't just a physician's problem. It's everybody's problem. It's our nation's problem."

"It really disturbs me to see how America treats the elderly. People are so transient and that splits up the family. There's no one to take care of the elderly," he added.

For families that unwillingly are separated by miles, Mr. Hansen sees the University's shared-housing program as a solution: "This is the ideal way. You get the multigenerational interaction back — youth taking care of the elderly."

Mr. Hansen and his family anticipate sharing Mrs. Clark's home until he finishes medical school. Even now, he knows leaving for a home of their own will be a difficult transition.

"It'll be kind of sad to leave," said Mr. Hansen. "It will be like leaving Grandma."

Another young family probably will be selected to share Mrs. Clark's home and, like the Hansens, realize the pleasure of knowing and helping "Grandma." 

Debbie Vien and her daughter, Alicia

